

The Construction of Femininity in Shopping

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Abstract

In different historical stages, the nature of women has been explained from the religious myth, the moral principles, the scientific rationality and the psychological analysis. In the consumer society, the widespread consumption not only changes people's daily life but also their social relations, world views and values. Men and women with the effect of commodities show different characteristics. The consumption generalization is the basic fact in the consumer society. Women, as the important consuming power, become the key target group for enterprises and media. In order to correspond with the commercial operation, the mass media guides women and constructs a femininity to serve for the commercial profits.

Generally speaking, consumption culture constructs femininity from the following two aspects: on the one side, it constructs a modern female beauty standard—young, beautiful and sexy. Women thus become a huge consuming group of hairdressing and fashion. On the other side, it still advocates the traditional image of good housewives. Female consumers are oriented as the agent purchasers for the whole family. It demonstrates in this paper that shopping is sexual consuming. Woman's beautiful image and good housewives image presents on their "agent purchasers" role in shopping.

Keywords: femininity construction, shopping, consumption culture

1. Introduction

After the Second World War, consumption culture entered into the period of extreme prosperity and extended to the rest of the world (Stearns, 2001). The rapid development of consumption culture can be tracked from the changes in stores, advertising terms, and commodity diversification. At the same time, leisure was also categorized into consuming for the first time. The meaning of consumption has changed. What's more important is that the gender concept entered the field of the consumption culture at that time. Moreover, consumption began to be seen as things related to women.

The fact of women as consumers has a great significance. Women actively engage in the consuming. They decorate their home according to publications. Their images appear on a variety of advertisements and a variety of magazine covers and become objects of consumption, consumed and bought home. Germaine Greer analyzed female's leading role in consuming in *The Whole Woman*: "At present, around 80% of commodities are consumed by women. Modern economy mainly relies on woman's consuming" (Greer, 2002). Woman's bodies are defined by countless cosmetics, cosmetic surgery. The body itself has become consumption goods. Baudrillard said, "Nothing is less certain today than sex, behind the liberation of its discourse. And nothing today is less certain than desire behind the proliferation of its images" (Baudrillard, 1998).

Consumption and femininity are the relative topic of this thesis. With Baudrillard's theory on consumption, this thesis will specify on a special cultural area controlled and affected by market. Meanwhile it is a thesis about social gender, specifically, a thesis about female. Women are an important consuming power. They had become the key target group for enterprises and media. In order to conform to the commercial operation mode, the mass media guides and constructs a femininity to serve for the commercial profits. The marketing proposals devotes to re-defining the femininity according to the benefits requirement. The important purpose for them is to develop a kind of commercial discourse which can be accepted extensively. The subject discussed here is not single but plural female. The culture of commercial promotion is very actively on constructing the plural women. The focus on multivariate helps to analyze different parts of femininity construction. The issue discussed here is the construction of femininity in a specific link during the process of goods circulation: focusing on female consumers and creating their market. In daily life, the way of shopping and self-construction integrates together. Once consumption and femininity are analyzed in a specific environment, the connection will be very obvious. In mass media, an important phenomenon is to highlight the effect of

a special social group—the young female and their lifestyle. The beautiful images in advertisement operate the symbolic manipulation over women, which tell them what kind of a woman can be seen as beautiful, charming and sexy. Meanwhile, shopping displays another characteristic of good women. They take care of family and shopping not only for themselves but also for their family. They are the consumer agent for family.

2. The Magic Beauty in Advertisement

The basic feature of the consumer society is the aestheticism of daily life (Zhou, 2004). And it is this “aestheticism” that inspires people’s desire of consuming and shopping. This aesthetics requires the corresponding living environment and representation on human beings. The former reflects on consumption boasting beauty. The latter reflects increasingly on people’s appearance and outlook. The aestheticism of daily life is transformed into the pursuit of physical aesthetics, which requires the body keep pace with the leading fashion standard. The physical and natural body is utilized as social. The body aesthetics builds up a large potential consumption market. A lot of body products, especially products on female body, have become a means to produce body itself rather than the means to live as before. Li Qi said: “Although fashion and female beauty standards changed constantly, female body always keeps the basic commercial value as the public consumption of goods” (Li, 2008).

In constructing the myth of “beauty”, the advertising just as the magic wand of wizard has a magic power. Accompanying the advertisements in television, broadcast and network, female “beauty” has become a mass article of consumption. However, as a market strategy, the “beauty” concept promoted by advertisement is actually a “bait”, crafted carefully by commercial marketing. With the suppression of “beauty” discourse, women fell into the trap—a kind of “beauty” standard and passively accept the ruling principle of the consumption market. Women in the commercials lost their own language, expressions, perception, emotions, and finally becomes a symbol of tool. The body, in the consumer society, is not only the human body but also an important product and circular symbol, which can be “bought” and “used” as consumer goods (Zhou, 2004).

The dominant media repeatedly suggests that soft and elegant body figure and attractive face with a charming smile are the way leading you to the happiness. With the inspiration of standard beauty, women do not hesitate to join the ranks of cosmetic consuming. The “beauty economy” is constituted by the beauty industry and beauty market. Beauty resource is quietly changing people’s consumption structure. According to the statistics of National Federation of Cosmetic Industry Association, the income of beauty service industry in China in 2004 accounted for 5.47% in tertiary industry and accounted for 1.82% of the gross national product. Consumer Survey in 20 cities of China shows that the largest personal expenses for urban women in 2006 are “beauty” consuming, including apparel, beauty salons, shaping fitness with an average expenditure of 3618 yuan. The ideal beauty has become a goal for many women. In the wave of “beauty economy”, women are in droves.

Since the beginning of the 1980s, advertisement accompanying with the invention of TV appeared in every household. At the beginning, the showgirls on the screen were not accepted, but nowadays they are very common. The advertisement images, taking singers or movie stars as the spokesperson, are the standard and norm for women supervising themselves. Advertising displays woman’s charming by plastic surgery, slimming, fashion, shopping, travelling, health, leisure and so on. With the image of success, wealth, beautiful appearance, good figure, fashion dress, extraordinary grace and happy life, advertisement re-defines the essence of female beauty. The latent discourse of advertising implies: every successful woman is a beautiful fashion woman. Beauty is the door for woman to open an ideal life. Beautiful, you can do anything; if not, you can do nothing.

The commercial operation in market transfers the complex problems in daily life, like anxiety, tension, lost into consumption behaviors, that is, purchasing commodities. Women can participate widely. The youth, graceful and successful women produce a beauty simulation, many women thus rely on advertisement promise to realize their happiness, success, the life value and meaning. Today, female “beauty” and “figure” as an ideology become a new myth and superstition.

As it is stated above, advertising is a magic tool to produce the desire of consuming, the most effective regulator for mass consumption, and the most important step for market operation. In fact, in the last phase of 19th century when capitalism just entered the modern stage, women began to be “concerned” by market. After 1880, American manufacturers have been aware of a coming promising economic opportunity: the large scale of industrial production made market unprecedented prosperous and abundant. They also found that, the market urgently needs a huge consumer groups to balance the huge production. At this time, the merchants were aware of the arising female consumption. It is the American Civil War in 1860-1865 that gave birth to the consumer economy: first of all, the war activated a new enterprise—light industry (the food industry, clothing industry and all kinds of daily necessities industry). Then, women took the place of man in the front level of war to the factories, and became the workers earning money for the family. “Work” consumed housewife’s “household” time, women started to buy clothes, fast food and household goods in store

(previously, the above items produced and consumed by women at home). After war, professional women and housewives kept the consuming habit. In order to keep female consumers, merchants tried every means to use advertisement to “persuade” and “stimulate” consumers. Businessmen knew that advertising is the commodity circulation intermediary and it can dredge channel and speed up the turnover process. It is the twin’s relationship of commodity advertising and market. Concise Encyclopedia Britannica regards the 19th century as an expansion stage for commodity and advertising: “the industrial revolution increased factory products. Advertising helps to promote the products” (1985). There is only one purpose for commodity advertising in the industrial age: to create consumption—create market demand by stimulating the consumption desire and further enlarge the market space.

Therefore, with the influence of advertising media, women became the successful target for the domestic capital socialist market. From the end of the 19th century, “beauty” and “consumption” become the market strategy for merchants to explore female market. In 1892, the Practical Trend Magazine published in the United States, with the introduction of the female appearance, introduced an “ideal” female image. The “beauty” started to be on the stage (Lury, 2008). Then, more magazines are keen on presenting this topic. They construct female beauty with songs and images. The booming rising of cosmetic industry brought about more woman’s magazines advocating beauty consumption. At the same time, they create more compliments to “young beauty” and more preach to find happiness. On the exquisite advertising layout of magazines, girls with elaborating makeup smile are young, pretty and fashionable?. With the charming images, they promote the cosmetics industry as well as the consumption ideology of “beauty”. In 1918, the capitalist market of American and further the whole world ushered the first heyday of cosmetics consumption. In 1920, a businessman predicted that the beauty would be the inexhaustible resources in future market. In order to eliminate all kinds of “prejudice” that could hinder woman’s consumption, advertisement began to create meticulously an ideological discourse for “beauty”: woman’s beauty is the basic requirement to husband and be faithful to the family; the first responsibility for woman is to make themselves charming; and if you are a woman, you should make up. Furthermore, beauty becomes a kind of ethical sermon. Cosmetics convey a respect to others, a kind of polite behavior and even a behavior to avoid shame (Ripowzi, 2000). With the concept of beauty, the female beauty equals beauty consumption.

In the great depression of the 1930s, American media were busier. In order to activate the market, industrial economy cannot wait to turn “beauty” as a fashion trend for the mass consumers. At that time, media magazines sold the ideology to women: the pursuit to beauty is woman’s right and the wise way to catch husband’s heart. To Baudelaire, “Women must dress up in order to look nice”. “When woman is trying to make herself more charming and pretty, she is exercising a ‘right’ and completes a responsibility”. “Now beauty is free” (Ripowzi, 2000). This speech is renovated at times: “A lovely girl is an accident, but a beautiful woman is a kind of achievement!” “No ugly woman, only lazy woman!” “Nothing can resist individuality!” “Be beautiful for the beautiful sex!” “The only way to get happiness is being beautiful!” (Ripowzi, 2000)

There are “fashion and hairdressing” columns in nearly every women newspaper or magazine (an advertisement column especially for women), which occupy 50% of pages of the whole publication. On the pictures, girls with nice appearance and sexy figure display a magic attraction to readers. These bright, beautiful and vigorous images are the sign for media to popularize the charming, which initiate the largest scale of consumption in 20th century—fashion consuming in mass media era, which is a kind of mass consumption connecting with “fashion for the poor” and manipulated by commercial strategy. It is believed that since there are a lot of ways for women to be beautiful such as cosmetics, making up, fitness and so on, there is no excuse to forgive woman’s “ugliness”. Every woman is responsible to present a charming image by any means. New fashion trend caused an ardent argument. In this argument, some optimistic social theories concluded: the mass consumption with “beauty” as the key point promotes the progress of democracy. “Beauty” was the privilege for the rich and the middle class, but now it is a right for all women. What’s more, when female beauty was not the privilege for the noble, it become a great project where women could show their individuality and constructing themselves as they like. On this point, it is an “independent war” that woman fight for their “characteristics” and “individuality” (by the means of self-instruction). It is said that it is the worship on beauty that woman won the social status they have never had before. Therefrom, the progress of social popularization strides forward to the new era.

Thus it is industry and media civilization that bring female history to a new age—commerce/ democracy stage. It is this argument such as “populace”, “commerce/democracy” that generates some popular concept: work is a special factor for women to pursuit beauty. The more passion woman shows in work, the more care she shows in her appearance. Professional women spend more time in making up. They go to beauty salon frequently and are keen on fitness exercises and further take cosmetics plastic to make them more pretty and vigorous when it is necessary (Ripowzi, 2000). In those careers that woman dominates, the appearance plays a special important role. Women should invest in appearance. They must work well and be charming forever (Ripowzi, 2000). It is not difficult to see that female is a sex

that should dedicate to beauty. Unfortunately, the “popularization” and “commerce/democracy” of beauty deify the function of beauty, which makes beauty a kind of religion. With the boast of commercial myth, beauty seems to be a magic drug opening a shortcut for women to be independent, individual, equal and peaceful.

They exaggerate the meaning of pursuing beauty for women. This meaning can be regarded as a way for women to resist fate as well as a way for women participating the world and realizing their value. Thus, the movement fighting against “fat” to “restore”, “reshape” and “manage” body is a democratic revolution fighting for “human rights”. Obviously, women want to try hairdressing, which is the best proof for the success of the consumption myth for women. Woman’s infatuation to hairdressing and losing weight has nothing to do with naïve and ignorance, which is much more about the problem of self “myth”. What’s more, a lot of theories show that: each person has the right to restore and reshape themselves and every one should manage their bodies positively.

It should be acknowledged that the ideology of “downsizing figure” and “slimming” violate female traditional mission of reproducing and affirm that the purpose of a woman’s existence is not only giving birth to a baby. Female’s status is not classified by the capability of reproducing. On this point, “downsizing figure” and “slimming” do reflect that women want to free themselves from just giving birth to babies (Ripowzi, 2000). However, the development of female individualism goes together with the social normalization: on the one hand, woman’s body has been free from the old shackles, maternity and clothing; but on the other hand, her body succumbed to be more standardized, more coercive, more worrying aesthetic shackles. Furthermore, in the beauty project of fighting against fat, those beauty discourses ultimately become a kind of “violence”. “Beauty” is reduced to a “tyranny”. The tyranny of beauty is not only to make the female body suffering, but also torture their spirit. As the price for “beauty”, excessive weight loss automatically becomes a “normal” behavior to gain “beauty” although the violence on their own bodies. Self-control and regular exercise to achieve the slim standard succumb to a mandatory standard. A large number of psychological studies have shown that the more psychological women pursuit to be slim, the deeper women feel guilty and anxiety. The experts also found that in order to lose weight, women try every means to exclude the heat that has been absorbed in body, which has led to serious health problems: physical and mental imbalance (chronic fatigue, restlessness, menstrual disorders, libido recession, stomach intestine and esophagus damage, nervous system disorders and various diseases; slimming repeatedly failed—weight rebound—aggravate the frustration, the guilt and shame, as well as depression and autism). Therefore, some researchers called beauty project as “a vicious machine” metaphorically—a “vicious” tool with the coverage of beauty kill female’s self-confidence and self-esteem and make women self-destruct. The “beauty” advocated by market just looks like liberating women. Because in the media discourse of commercialization, the consumption-oriented “beauty” aims at ultimately “sexual attraction”—women need it to marry and to maintain family. And because the mandatory requirements “beauty” has been extensively recognized in female world, this kind of femininity again rooted firmly in the depths of the female consciousness.

In a word, “beauty” as a kind of fashion is set up especially for women by “guiding consumption”. It is the direct products of economic behavior. Therefore, the “aim of beauty” only obeys the requirement of commerce, which demands that women accept the commercial principle.

3. Shopping: A “Privilege” for Woman

On its great contribution to the construction of modern femininity, advertisement’s effect reflects on its leading role on woman’s psychology from the side of the visual. However, as the above discussed that the ultimate purpose of advertisement is to create the desire of consuming and further to create the economic profits. Shopping, as the last step of the consumption process, directly reflects advertisement’s effect. Since women are the target consumer group for most advertisements, women inevitably connect with the activity of shopping. On the modern consumer strategy, advertisement mechanism is no doubt very successful. Shopping connects with gender and becomes a “privilege” for women. Shopping constructs the femininity and become a standard to measure femininity or masculinity.

When talking about “shopping”, most people would naturally think of women. To explain this phenomenon, a survey (Cambell, 2003) is introduced in this part. From October 1991 to May 1992, a survey was carried out among a group of men and women from 25 to 45 in Leeds. These interviewees belong to A, B, C1, C2 and D five different socioeconomic strata. According to the analysis of the interviews, there are two main findings: firstly, individuals show different attitude to shopping; secondly, the different attitudes are subject to the effect of gender rather than any relation to other factors. The result shows that: the number of women with a positive attitude to shopping is far more than that of men. Most of men are negative to shopping. Moreover, women are more likely to behave very positively—that is, they “love” shopping, not just “like”. Similarly, men are more likely to express a strong negation emotion—they “hate” shopping, not just “do not like”. Furthermore, women are interested in different forms of shopping. However, men just show interest in certain procurement (such as records, computer or electrical products). Compared with other leisure activities, like watching TV or playing sports, women prefer to go shopping.

The study shows that shopping is a complete gender activity. This “gender” activity is universally regarded as one gender-related—especially related closely with the role of women. Thus, the shopping itself is considered as a certain “female” activity. As a result, when a child adapts to the social life with a gender view, during the process of gaining gender identity they are likely to learn: shopping helps to determine the role of women.

In fact, fundamentally speaking, in modern society the division of work between men and women is connected directly with production and consumption. On this point, it seems the concept of masculinity and femininity is defined by the difference of production and consumption. In other words, man is the “breadwinner” instead of “homemaker”, so that their identity has nothing to do with shopping.

There is significant distinction among the consumption models that men and women prefer. So when men enjoy the consumption form like “drinking” and “watching sports”, it is reasonable that woman enjoy the consumption form like “shopping”. Most evidence show that shopping is the female dominant activity. Women not only account for the majority of shoppers, they also spend much more time than men do in shopping.

It is probably assumed that shopping is an activity related to gender, so it is reasonable that in the survey men show much less interest in shopping. If they realize that shopping is a “female” activity, they have enough excuse for their little interest in shopping, or they will think that there is a problem with their masculinity. Actually, many men do believe that shopping will increase their “effeminacy”. In fact, at least it is possible for some men that this public disgust to shopping seems to prove their masculinity.

If it is reasonable that shopping is related closely with “female”, then there will be a clear implication to men. Give up shopping to avoid any possible threat to their masculinity, or go shopping to risk being considered as “effeminate”. The first option is to avoid shopping completely. An effective way for men is shopping by mail or having their partners do this for them. In most families, women go shopping for family and even man’s personal items. One-third of women admit that they purchase clothes for their husbands or boyfriends, but only one or two women mentioned that their boyfriend bought clothes for them before, and usually underthings instead of everyday clothes. However, for most men, it is not realistic never shopping. Because their girlfriends or wives can not buy everything they need at any time. In this case, keeping “distance” seems to be an available way, which shows that although they are shopping, they are still reluctant or not fully devote to this activity. So men try to keep a distance from their shopping and say that they have no choice but to buy. Or they go shopping as little as possible and as quickly as possible to show that they’re not doing woman’s matter and further avoid any possible threat to their gender identity.

Not surprisingly, people try to distinct this contrast by its instrumental factor and affective factor. Men tend to regard shopping as a purely activity to purchase for demand. Women are more reluctant to regard it as pleasure-seeking activities, which is associated with the satisfaction of desire, that is to say, men think shopping is just a way to get the items they need without enticing value, while women think shopping is a meaningful activity itself—no matter they gain the items they need or not. Women do not only regard shopping as a way to meet their material needs but also a way to enjoy themselves.

This contrast can explain man and woman’s different attitude to shopping and the time and money consumed very well. In essence, men believe that shopping is a “need”: buy what they need in stores and go home. As one of their interviewees expressed, men like “go, buy and return”. “Looking around” or “go around” is not regarded as the essential part of this process but a way of wasting time. Male shoppers claim that they don’t care about the price. In their philosophy, time is more valuable than money. Therefore, if shopping means that they must go to malls frequently, they may refuse this way and would rather pay much more money to save time. From this perspective, man is similar with the “convenience shoppers”.

In contrast, women regard “looking around” as the essence of shopping. Go shopping is the only direct way to have the information about the products. And only by knowing about products directly can the “wishes” be inspired to produce the desire to purchase. Besides, women hold that they enjoy shopping no matter if they buy what they need. For example, they mentioned that they are happy even “just looking around” or “walking around”, which satisfy their aesthetic feeling and emotion need. In fact, when women mentioned the word “shopping”, it usually means that they go to enjoy the leisure time. Shopping is just like tourism for them. They often hang out but do not buy anything. Therefore, when men specifically mention that they need to buy something, women just say they go shopping. What’s more, women prefer having other activities with shopping together, such as chatting with friends, drinking coffee, eating and so on. In a word, women enjoy the process of shopping very much. They thus spend much time and energy on shopping, which give them a direct material feeling. This is an interesting fact that women can enjoy their leisure time. For those men who do not like shopping, spending so much time for such a little things is just a big waste.

There is a way to observe the gender differences in the activity of shopping: to men, shopping is a kind of work; while to women, it is a leisure way to enjoy themselves. This phenomenon indicated that man must be responsible for life or

on traditional thinking they need work, so they tend to classify shopping as a kind of work. On the contrary, women is the group who do not need to work hard and have much more time. To men, they not only regard shopping as a work but also judge shopping with the standard of work, that is, being rational and effective. Women tend to regard shopping as a leisure way, for example, purchasing clothes is a kind of entertainment. Shopping is totally different with work or doing housework. Like any other entertainment, they believe by shopping they can indulge themselves to pursuit a reasonable and lawful pleasure.

The question is why women are keen on shopping (especially shopping for clothes) while men do not. There are two explanations for this: firstly, a woman is inclined to imagine their image much more than a man does. Dressing up usually connects with clothes and decorations. Secondly, female not male is regarded as the gender with the skill of evaluating beauty. Thus, women have enough reason to go shopping. It is their “privilege”. This “privilege” defines the nature of women at the same time.

4. Femininity

In the previous part, with the analysis of advertisement and shopping, the way and the purpose of femininity construction has been displayed. Generally speaking, modern consumption culture constructs femininity from the following two aspects: on the one hand, by the operation of advertisement it constructs a modern female beauty standard—young, beautiful and sexy. Women thus become a huge consuming group of hairdressing and fashion. On the other hand, it still advocates the traditional good housewives images. Female consumers are oriented as the agent purchasers for the whole family.

4.1 A Beautiful Lover

To women, one of the typical features of the consumer society is to create the myth of beauty and to construct a lifestyle through aesthetic consumption. As conforming to the nature of the goods, beauty is a kind of potential resource for market. The female beauty, as a means of profits, is operated by marketing at most nowadays. High fashion and designer styles in clothing, individualized fitness programs, exercise equipment for home use, private gymnasium, diet regimen and cosmetic surgery are readily available as the means for perfecting [female] physical appearance (Negrin, 2008).

“Woman’s magazines are full of advertisements to attract female readers to consume. Female representation in advertisements becomes predominant in generating the meaning of women” (Ding, 2007). As an example of magazine cover: in domestic magazines oriented youth with large amount of distribution, there are more than 20 categories with beautiful ladies images as the covers, which accounts for more than 2/3 of magazines. Furthermore, these images have nothing to do with woman’s working, living, learning but only focus on the beautiful appearance. Nearly all women in cosmetics, hair care products, weight loss products, household products and other advertisements are young and beautiful. In the commercial media discourse, the concept of “beauty” is widely accepted.

Women use modern products to adorn their bodies, shampoo, fancy soap, cosmetics, hairdressing and even surgery operation. During this process, a special kind of modern standard of femininity is constructed. Beauvior concluded “one is not born a woman; one becomes one” (Beauvior, 2009). Tuin explained: “It is a social-constructionist statement meant to indicate that women are not determined by biology. Because one is made female, because femininity is a social construct, alternatives can be designed” (Tuin, 2009). That means woman is cultivated as a woman with a kind of social femininity. This social femininity affects women since they were born. From that time on, the female is trained and educated to be a woman (Rice, 2002).

Body consuming is the manipulated activity concealed in shopping. Woman’s bodies have been brought into the area of commodity production and circulation, sold and bought with its particular exchange value (Gao, 2006). In shopping, the typical physical characteristics of femininity promote woman’s cult of figure. Mary Evans said, “what important to fashion (clothes or other forms of expense) is its relationship with ‘femininity’” (Evans, 2010). Based on the old feminine ideology of elegance, the nowadays society emphasizes much on woman’s thinness and bosomy chests, which shows woman’s beauty as a perfect lover. Susan Bordo said “We learn the rules directly through bodily discourse: though images that tell us what clothes, body shape, facial expression, movements, and behavior are required” (Bordo, 2007). With this discourse, the figure of woman is advocated greatly by media, website and advertisements, old means and new technologies. The cult of figure showing femininity makes women dissatisfy their bodies. With Swedlund’s illustration, this point can be described as “The lucrative cosmetics, losing weight and fashion industry contribute to this beautiful mythology about female body with all kinds of moving ideas, and these ideas, in turn, plays adverse effect in women” (Urla & Swedlund, 2003). This spontaneous, voluntary and autonomous reconstruction on her is actually a “have to” choice in consumer society logic. Most women on screen as the consumer models are thin with large breasts.

4.2 A Good Wife and Mother

In most advertisements of household appliances or domestic products, such as soap, washing powder, detergent, cooking oil, smoke machines, rice cookers and so on, women are the protagonists. Beautiful and elegant well-known actress Jiang Wenli made a speech for European Style cabinets: “The stage of fashion, Oupai, for home and for love”. In the advertisement of Jinglongyu oil, gentle and virtuous housewife put the delicious dishes on table. Looking at her husband and son enjoying the food, she laughs. In the advertisement for laundry soap “Diaopai”, an old lady said when washing a barrel of clothes: “I always use Diaopai laundry soap, transparent soap is Diaopai. With Diaopai transparent soap, clothes are washed clean and not faded. The neighbors love using Diaopai”. Her husband reads newspaper and drinks tea, looking at his wife satisfactorily when his wife says these words. Young and beautiful actress Sun Li said: “Diaopai natural soap powder, using one time, I know it is what I want!” These examples fully reflect an interpretation to female consumers, that women master the voice of household consumption.

According to statistics, in Chinese families, more than 40% of wives have the property rights, while only 20% husbands have the right. Female consumers play a particularly important role in the purchasing activity. They not only purchase goods they need but also for their husbands, parents, and kids. Therefore, many well-designed home and fashion magazines target female consumers, providing the latest consumer knowledge to women. Some scholars defined the role of women in family consumption as “agent consumers”.

However, this agent consumption is not, as some people regard, a manifestation to dominate family power. Feminist scholars Mitchell claimed that the contemporary family can be seen as a painting with three functions of sex, fertility and socialization (woman’s world), surrounded by production (man’s world). The agent consumption for women is actually a form of housework. Restricting women in the family field means that women have to toil to ensure the reproduction of the system—they bear, upbringing and educate new workers, serve and support their husband.

Mass media leads female consumption on hairdressing, fashion and entertainment. In the famous female website—Ruili.com.cn, there are 18 columns: clothes, decoration, hairdressing, household, emotion, travelling, the bride, sex, health, fitness, food, constellation, model, style, work, breeding. The physical consumption and beauty consumption account for eight. Besides, household, food and breeding are the “agent consumption”. There is only one column concerning about female career.

Why is it? Firstly, it is the influence of traditional culture. The norms of patriarchal culture position different gender roles for men and women. Men earn for family outside of home, while women maintain family at home. The female beauty is on their appearance and their capability lies in their contribution for family. This perception has been firmly established, which formed a gender stereotyped prejudices. Secondly, in the media economy, the operation of the mass media has been commercialized widespread, they obtain the maximum economic benefit by “selling” the readers or audiences to advertisers. The consumerism with the effect of mass media and the purpose of commercial profit plays the role of controlling and constructing female, which exacerbate the extent of woman’s “collective unconsciousness”. Woman’s “agent consumers” images consolidate female traditional social role, that is, a good wife and mother.

5. Conclusion

The commercial culture makes great effort to define consumption and create great shopping environments for women. It is very active on constructing femininity. When women, as the important consuming power and media targets, become the key target group for enterprises and media, a market serving for them has been established. In this market, young female body and lifestyle are highlighted and promoted to be an extensively acceptable standard, which further helps to construct the modern femininity in the consumer society.

“Shopping” is regarded as a female activity on some point. Many elaborate fashion and household magazines take women as their target readers, providing the latest consumption information to women. Shopping has women consume and be consumed happily. This activity related with gender does give women some kind of “privilege”. Not only can they go shopping, but also they should go shopping. Shopping is a way to show their femininity. When women are shopping happily, they are actually defined as a social role—a lover, wife and mother. Their femininity is constructed. Femininity roots successfully in the depth of female awareness.

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